Teaching and Learning in Field Training: Lessons Learned from Students

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Field training is an indispensable component in the training of practicing professions since the educational process must involve learning by doing and opportunities to engage in practice so as to learn. Field training in social work education serves as the primary arena for integrating knowledge and values with skills and the socialization of the professional person. Supervised practice, rather than the acquisition of a specified body of theory, was perceived as the primary element in the development of a social worker (George, 1982; cited in Skolnik, 1989, p. 49). Students also considered field training the one component in their social work education, which has significant impact on them (Anderson, 1979; Roberts, 1973; cited in Raskin, 1989, p.2).

Field training in social work education provides a structure for a student to acquire professional competence by actually doing what a practitioner does on the site of practice. Learning is supported by three arrangements: (a) the selection of practice assignments; (b) planning, reporting and analysing practice in written form; and (c) planning and studying one's practice with a fieldwork instructor in regular supervision sessions.

Fieldwork instruction is an area of educational practice, which remains largely unexplored in social work education. In a study of the number and type of reported studies covering field education (Smith, 1981), it was found that there were few empirical studies of fieldwork and of field education generally, and fieldwork education was not strongly featured as part of social work knowledge building. The situation did not improve much in subsequent years. Raskin (1989) notes that field instruction is the least developed area in the profession's effort on knowledge building.

Thus, how fieldwork instruction is carried out by social work teachers and the learning experience of students in field training are both worthwhile studying.

In a study of the research priorities as seen by the experts in field instruction using the Delphi Technique (Raskin, 1989), the five priority areas identified were: (1) How does one test for the attainment of the specific skill established as objectives to be achieved in field instruction? (2) What are appropriate learning objectives and related tasks for undergraduates, first year, and second year graduate students? (3) What makes for an effective professional experience in terms of field instruction learning assignments and characteristics of field teachers? (4) What types of learning experiences contribute most effectively to the achievement of different content and skill by different students? (5) How does planning for field instruction fit into the overall educational and curriculum process?

The Council on Social Work Education sponsored two surveys of field education: (1) a national study of all BSW and MSW field education departments; and (2) a selected sample of field agencies. It was found that both field educators and agency personnel identified the same problematic areas in field training: the integration of academic content and field experience; conflicting demands of job and field instruction responsibilities; need for standards for the evaluation of students; training for new and experienced field instructors; communication between schools and agencies; and the qualification and needs of students.

Previous studies on fieldwork instruction focused either on the teaching aspect (how fieldwork instruction is delivered) or the learning aspect (the learning patterns of students) in field training. However, teaching and learning is seen here as inter
How do students learn from field training and through the three arrangements above? The focus of our investigation is on the teaching and learning aspects in field training.

The way we approach this question is drawn on three intellectual sources: (a) experiential learning (Kolb); (b) reflective practice (Schön); (c) professional literature on fieldwork instruction.

Taps students' learning style - as they perceived it drawing on their experience in the fieldwork placement. We need to examine the concept of “learning style” - what the concept refers to, whether it is stable, whether it is dependent on the nature of the learning task, whether there is interaction between learning style and the learning environment in which learning takes place. The ensuing discussion is then extended to the context of field training.

Implicit notions underlying the items in Q.16: (a) reflection-in-action; (b) reflection-on-action; (c) knowledge use - pre-action planning and learning through knowledge of result; (d) guidance from teacher - pre-action planning; (e) guidance from teacher - post-action corrective feedback; (f) guidance from teacher - pre-action coaching; (g) observing practitioners' practice; (h) observing teacher's practice; (i) testing out corrective feedback; (j) learning from client feedback.

What do these implicit notions suggest about learning in field training? First, learning by doing is based on reflection on one's action (and experience of it), and there are two points when reflection takes place: pre-action and post-action. Second, also learning by doing - but the focus is on knowledge use and evaluating the result of knowledge use at the end of practice. Third, learning through fieldwork supervision - by way of guidance from teachers. Guidance takes three forms: didactic, coaching, and modelling. Fourth, in-situ learning (or situated learning) where the student has direct access to the practice of experienced practitioners, including the teacher. Lastly, learning from client feedback is not simply knowledge of result but knowledge of result supplied by the client. Implicit here is the notion that practice is mutually constructed, an interactive process involving two actors, namely, a practitioner and a client. Practitioners would attend to client response as the only source of feedback within the practice situation to judge the appropriateness of their action. In this sense, client response serves as the knowledge of result. Ultimately, it is the client who can best judge one's practice.

In the light of the above analysis, learning in field training is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Its many ramifications is captured by notions such as “learning in-and-through practice” (a la Donald Schön), “experiential learning”, “situated learning”, and “interpersonal learning” (teachers and clients). The quality of learning and the type of learning derived are influenced by a number of factors: the practice setting, the nature of the practice tasks, the supervisory relationship, the teaching style of the supervisor, the learning style of the student. It is envisaged that the match (and mismatch) between the teaching style of the fieldwork instructor and the learning style of the students is most important in determining what the teaching and learning process is like as well as what is learned. Furthermore, given the power differential in the teacher-student relationship, it is likely that the student will try to accommodate to the teaching style of the teacher.

The teaching style of practice teachers in field training is seen in the eyes of the students What they experienced as the way their fieldwork instructors provide supervision to them. We can think of a number of dimensions that fieldwork instructors may vary in terms of: (a) autonomy vs. control; (b) error-learning vs. error-free learning; (c) direct feedback and guidance vs. reflection on practice; (d) theory/concept focus vs. skill/technique focus. When we characterize a teacher's way of teaching as his/her “teaching style”, it may give a false impression that teaching style is stable and that a teacher teaches with one style only. We wish to find that fieldwork teachers have multiple styles in stock and they teach strategically, meaning that teaching style is used purposefully to suit a student's learning style, the practice tasks, or extraneous demand on the student. Whether this is the case has yet to be confirmed.
At the end, how would students evaluate their fieldwork teachers? One major theme in this regard, which is often expressed by students, has something to do with the affective experience in the student-teacher relationship. There is a tendency for students to evaluate a teacher in terms of whether the latter is supportive and caring as opposed to being critical (or overly critical), and whether he/she is responsible and committed in helping students to learn. Other than that, we wish to study students' perception of what that their teachers have helped them to learn in the fieldwork placement. In this regard, learning outcome is conceptualized into three broad categories: (a) about knowledge and skills for practice; (b) about the profession; (c) about service delivery and agency operation; (d) about oneself as a social worker.

It is postulated that students' perceived learning outcome will be related to the teaching style of their teachers. At the same time, a teacher's teaching style will have effect on a student's affective experience in the student-teacher relationship. Teachers who help by offering explicit guidance on what to do will likely be perceived by students as supportive. Those who are more preoccupied with giving post-action feedback to students or with how to put knowledge into practice may be perceived as critical.

On students' perception of how they learned in field training

The result of factors analysis identifies four factors:

(a) Factor 1 is made up of three items: (guidance from teacher)

“seeking guidance from teacher to plan action”
“getting coaching from teacher during behavioural rehearsal”
“carrying out teacher's suggestion and evaluating the result”

What is common among these three items is that the student relies heavily on the teacher's guidance at three points in time: pre-action phase, interactive phase, and post-action phase. The student learns from the teacher.

(b) Factor 2 is made up of three items: (action-based learning)

“doing and reflecting on action at the same time” (reflection-on-action)
“use knowledge to plan action and evaluate result afterwards”
“getting feedback from clients”

Students learn through immersing in action and reflecting on their experience at three points in time: (a) pre-action phase; (b) interactive phase; and (c) post-action phase. The first item is Schön's “reflection-in-action”. The second item has to do with use of knowledge in practice and using practice to test out knowledge (i.e. practice as theory-testing activity). The focus is on knowledge-in-use. The third item is indicative of attention on the interactive process in which the client is an actor in the process. Client response is a sort of feedback to the student.

(c) Factor 3 is made up of two items: (post-action learning)

“doing and reflecting on action afterwards”
“seeking corrective feedback from teacher on what have done”

Students who possess this learning style learn at the post-action phase either through one's own “reflection-on-action” or by way of feedback from teacher. This is likely to be “error-learning” since the student will not be able to get feedback during the interactive phase.
(d) Factor 4 is made up of two items: (situated learning)

“observing other practitioners at work”
“observing the practice of teacher”

Observational learning of this kind can only be accessible at the site of practice- what is referred to as “situated learning”. Access to observation of practitioners at work was actually structured as part of the learning experience of students. It is not sure how accessible it will be for students to observe their teachers’ practice. Presumably, only agency-based practice teachers will be in a position to share their practice with students.

**Student’s perception of teachers’ teaching style**

The result of factor analysis identifies three factors:

(a) Factor 1 is made up of four items: (practical guidance)

“gives direct feedback on what the student has done”
“offers explicit guidance on what the student should do”
“focuses more on the skills, techniques and other practical aspects of the student’s work”
“makes extensive use of video feedback and/or modelling to develop the student’s practice skills”

The items making up this factor are all concerned about the “how to” aspect of practice. Teachers demonstrating this teaching style provide guidance to students on what they have done or what they would do. Such guidance may be focused on pre-action planning, post-action feedback, and the student’s action in the interactive phase.

(b) Factor 2 is made up of two items: (cognitive instruction)

“makes extensive use of questioning strategy to stimulate the student’s thinking and reflection on practice”
“focuses more on theories and concepts and how to put them into practice”

This factor characterizes a teaching style which emphasizes on the cognitive work in practice. The teacher induces the student to engage in reflective practice and to examine knowledge use in practice. In contrast to the preceding teaching style, this teaching style does not focus on the “doing” part of practice but the “thinking” aspect of practice.

(c) Factor 3 is made up of two items loaded in opposite direction and hence can be seen as comprising two factors:

“goes through the planning of the student’s action in great details until the teacher is satisfied and allows the student to implement it”.

“allows the student to try out his/her plan first and helps the student to learn from the action experience afterwards”.

The first item suggests a teaching style which emphasizes on teacher guidance at the point of pre-action planning in order to ensure that the student will be able to do it right. The focus is on pre-action planning. The second item, on the contrary, suggests a teaching style that allows much autonomy to
the student to try things out. The function of the teacher is to help the student learn from the action experience afterwards. Thus, the focus is on post-action evaluation. Thus, this factor actually embodies two teaching styles each of which is the polar opposite of the other. The first one may be described as “pre-action instruction”. Teachers displaying this teaching style are likely to subscribe to “error-free” learning. Teachers in the second teaching style—referred to here as “post-action debriefing”—are more likely to accept “error-learning” as the way students learn in field training.

**Students' perception of what their teachers have helped them to learn**

There is an implicit assumption here that what students learn in field training is largely dependent on fieldwork instruction, i.e. on how teachers teach. The result of factor analysis indicates three factors:

(a) Factor 1 is made up of four items: (knowledge-based practice)

“acquire practice knowledge”
“see the connection between knowledge and practice”
“develop self-knowledge as a social worker”
“critically examine the knowledge claim of the social work profession”

The term “knowledge-based practice” is coined to label this type of learning. What is common among these four items is the reference made to knowledge in practice. It is interesting to note that self-knowledge as a social worker is referred to alongside of practice knowledge. The place of knowledge in practice is referred to in terms of the nature of “knowledge-practice link” and the status of the knowledge claim of the social work profession.

(b) Factor 2 is made up of three items: (perspective toward the social work profession)

“appreciate the nature of social work practice”
“appreciate the place of ethics and values in practice”
“critically examine the competence of the social work profession in delivering what it promises to deliver to the society”

This factor suggests what students learn about the profession as a result of the experience they acquired from taking up the professional role as a student social worker. The three items are themselves the product of professional socialization.

(c) Factor 3 is made up of two items: (service delivery)

“develop practice skills”
“develop critical ability in evaluating the quality of service and agency operation”

The second item is concerned about service delivery in that the teacher helps the student to critically evaluate the quality of service and agency operation. Such learning is possible only if both the teacher and the student have access to the service delivery system - what workers do to give service, who the clients are and how they receive service, and how the agency operates as a service organization. The first item is concerned about the competence in direct practice and, to that extent, is related to the quality of service.

**Relationship between learning style and teaching style**

One would speculate that, given the power differential between students and teachers, a student would be likely to try to accommodate the teacher's teaching style. Indeed, in mid-session evaluations, the
issue of matching between students' learning style and teachers' teaching style has often been raised by students. Invariably, students would indicate that they had tried to or had actually adjusted to the teacher's teaching style. This does not mean, of course, that teachers were passive and did nothing to accommodate to their students learning style. In other words, it would in reasonable to expect some sort of relationship between learning style and teaching style. Interestingly, this expectation is not supported by our research finding. There was no significant correlation between students' learning style with their perception of their teachers' teaching style.

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<tr>
<td>post-action learning</td>
<td>pre-action instruction</td>
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<td>(learning by doing?)</td>
<td>post-action debriefing</td>
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<td>situated learning</td>
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How do we explain this result? It would be convincing if students whose learning style was characterized as “post-actional learning” should be matched by the teaching style of “post-action evaluation”. Likewise, students who learn by seeking guidance from teachers should find the teaching style of “practical guidance” a good match. The absence of relationship between these two variables suggests that students' way of learning in the fieldwork placement- as perceived by them - has nothing to do with the teachers' way of teaching, again as perceived by them. Teaching and learning appear to be two unrelated phenomenon in field training. Why is this so?

Relationship between learning style and learning outcome

Again, there is no significant relationship between learning style and learning outcome. In other words, one's learning style has nothing to do with what one learns in field training. However, there is one caveat here. The question that taps students' perception of their learning outcome was phrased in such a way as to attribute outcome to what the teacher did to help.

Relationship between teaching style and learning outcome

There was significant correlation between a student's perceive learning outcome and the perceived teaching style of his/her teacher. The strength of the correlation is strong, with Pearson r ranging from .7493 to .8307. Each teaching style was correlated with all three types of learning outcome. The result suggests that what one learned from field training was strongly related to the perceived “teaching style” of one's teacher. Furthermore, each of the three teaching styles has bearing on all three types of learning in field training. This is to say, whichever way one teaches, fieldwork teachers will somehow help students to acquire all three types of learning outcome. That may be resulted from the fact that the four teaching styles are not content-specific. For instance, a teacher who emphasizes on practical guidance may at the same focus on knowledge use in practice, or on professional issues pertaining to the nature of social work or the ethics and values in social work practice, or on service delivery.

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Students' evaluation of the quality of the student-teacher relationship
In the study, the quality of the student-teacher relationship in field training was tapped in terms of students' perception of whether the teacher was perceived to be supportive and caring, to the extent that the student was motivated and positive toward the teacher's feedback. Students were divided into two sub-groups according to their response to this item. Students who found their teachers as supportive and caring were compared to those who did not in terms of their mean scores for each of the factors identified under learning style, teaching style, and learning outcome. The result shows that statistically significant difference was found between the two sub-groups in the following:

(a) Factor 1 under learning style: “guidance from teacher”

(b) Factor 1 under teaching style: “cognitive instruction”

(c) Factor 4 under teaching style: “post-action debriefing”

(d) All three factors under learning outcome: “knowledge-based practice”, “perspective toward social work profession” and “service delivery”

Students who perceived themselves as relying on teachers' guidance probably would be active in seeking guidance from their teachers. The latter in turn would likely provide the kind of guidance that their students asked for. Be this the case, students would be more likely to evaluate their teachers as supportive and caring - when guidance involves the teacher telling a student what to do. Students displaying the other three learning styles—“action-based learning”, “post-action learning” and “situated learning”—do not involve the teacher in a guidance role or, if it does, the teacher is thereto provide guidance on what the student had done. Indeed, the latter type of guidance may actually be perceived as critical rather than supportive.

The teaching style of “practical guidance” was found to be associated with positive evaluation by students of the teacher as supportive and caring. This is expected as these teachers were likely to be seen by their students as helpful. On the other hand, it is puzzling why the teaching style of “post-action debriefing” was related to students' evaluation of their teachers as “being supportive and caring”. Teachers displaying this teaching style might be considered by students as critical, since students were likely to learn from their mistakes. However, it depends very much on the manner this was done. A student might perceive the teacher as supportive and caring in giving him the autonomy to try things out and in helping the latter to learn from the action experience. The two other teaching styles would be more likely to have put the teacher in a critical position, given extensive use of probing questions on knowledge-use (where the teacher would have the upper hand) and correcting many times students' pre-action planning.

References


